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TOP NEWS IN BRIEF

Cease-fire gets a test

The fragile Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire was tested when an Israeli security officer was killed and his bodyguard wounded in what appeared to be a planned Palestinian assassination Thursday on a West Bank road.

The bodyguard killed the Palestinian gunman, Israeli security sources said.

An Israeli rescue worker who arrived at the scene shortly after the attack said there were no bullet holes on the outside of the car, indicating that the shooting had been at close range.

In other violence, a Palestinian was killed and two others wounded in a drive-by shooting on a West Bank road near Jerusalem late Wednesday night. Israeli security forces are investigating who was responsible.

IDF begins redeployment

Despite ongoing Palestinian attacks in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Israel Defense Force began withdrawing Thursday from positions it set up around Palestinian areas following the outbreak of violence last September.

U.S. to probe arms use

The U.S. General Accounting Office plans to investigate how Middle East nations use U.S. military assistance.

But it has not decided whether to probe Israel's use of American-made F-16 jets in a recent reprisal against the Palestinian Authority.

The investigation comes after Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) raised concerns that the F-16s are not being used for self-defense, which would be a violation of the U.S. Arms Export Control Act.

U.S. Arabs blast solidarity trip

Arab-American leaders attacked New York Gov. George Pataki's plan to lead a solidarity mission of legislators and public figures to Israel.

In an newspaper interview published Wednesday, the president of the Arab-American Institute, James Zogby, argued that Pataki's trip could damage the fragile hope for peace. Pataki's delegation — which will include pro-Israel activists, legislators and community activists — is expected to visit Israel after the New York state legislature adjourns for its summer break.

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

With Mideast emotions high, Web site takes on 'biased' media

By Michael J. Jordan

NEW YORK (JTA) — Nearly nine months into the Palestinian uprising, Jewish activists cite visits to Israel and street rallies as the two most effective ways to show solidarity with the Jewish state.

But the folks behind the Web site HonestReporting.com seem to have hit on a third approach — “cyber-activism.”

The fledgling, New York-based outfit has quickly gained a devoted following by pouncing on media outlets they feel either are reporting inaccurately on Israeli-Palestinian violence or engaging in flat-out anti-Israel bias.

Derided by its enemies as a group of “Zionists” and “right-wing extremists,” the Web site now has 13,000-plus members.

Several similar sites have sprouted in recent months, but HonestReporting distinguishes itself by including a sample letter of complaint for readers to send — and e-mail addresses of key editors and reporters at the offending news outlets.

“The media says it is committed to fair and accurate coverage, and what we're trying to do is to hold them to that standard,” said Sharon Tzur, director of Media Watch International, which runs HonestReporting.

Explaining differences in connotation between “settlements” and “neighborhoods,” or among “terrorists,” “militants” and “activists,” HonestReporting zeroes in on the word choices the media make and how those choices shape public opinion.

On March 26, for example, when 10-month-old Shalhevet Pass was shot by a Palestinian gunman, the online version of The Washington Post ran an Associated Press report headlined, “Jewish Toddler Dies in the West Bank.”

Guided by an HonestReporting missive, members flooded the Post's Web site with complaints demanding a switch from passive to active language to describe an act in which a sniper had lined up the baby's head in the cross hairs of his rifle scope.

Within 90 minutes, HonestReporting says, the Post had changed the headline to “Jewish Baby Shot Dead on West Bank.”

Perhaps even more significant than its efforts to sensitize or sting news outlets is the way HonestReporting empowers its members, many of whom are Diaspora Jews frustrated by their inability to do more to help Israel.

Take Jonathan Reich. A pediatric cardiologist in Lakeland, Fla., Reich is active in his synagogue and local Jewish federation.

But when Palestinian violence began last September, he sought ways to get involved as a means to “deal with my anger” at the situation, at the media, and at the international human rights organizations that seemed to be lining up against Israel.

“It can be very lonely sending e-mails” of complaint “or making long-distance phone calls; you can't go on doing it unless you feel like you're actually doing something,” Reich said.

Through HonestReporting, “if enough people write enough letters to enough journalists, these ‘little’ issues — which really are not so little — can be reported accurately,” he said. “Journalists shouldn't be allowed to say whatever they want and not be called on it.”

Reich said he's delivered to HonestReporting 30 members of his Conservative synagogue, which “gave them something to do instead of just sitting at home, wringing their hands and becoming apathetic.”

Says Tzur: “We're trying to get the Jewish community active, informing them and

MIDEAST FOCUS

Israel nabs suspected terrorists

Israeli police detained six Palestinians traveling in a car with knives, yarmulkas and cellular phones in their possession. The six, suspected of planning a terror attack, were handed over Thursday to the Shin Bet domestic security service for questioning.

Palestinian groups nix cease-fire

A coalition of 33 Palestinian groups — including Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's own Fatah movement — announced Wednesday that they reject the U.S.-mediated cease-fire agreement with Israel.

It is not clear, however, whether they are totally disavowing the cease-fire or merely object to the requirement that the Palestinian Authority arrest those who participate in terror attacks.

Report: Syrian troops leave Beirut

Syrian troops began leaving Beirut and surrounding areas on Thursday, Reuters reported.

The sudden redeployment of some of its 35,000 troops stationed in Lebanon followed Christian-led agitation against Syria's 26-year military presence.

IDF to get larger piece of pie

Israel's Finance Ministry said it plans to allocate an additional \$675 million to the Defense Ministry to deal with the Palestinian uprising, now in its ninth month.

Arab lawmaker faces probe

Israel's attorney general decided to launch a criminal investigation into an Israeli Arab legislator for making anti-Israel comments during a visit earlier this week to Damascus.

Elyakim Rubinstein ordered the police to investigate Azmi Beshara on suspicion of breaching the anti-terrorism act when he called on Israel's enemies to broaden their resistance to the Jewish state.

giving them a platform to be active and make a difference."

HonestReporting was the brainchild of two Jewish university students in London.

In October, soon after the outbreak of violence, the pair grew upset with the portrayal of events in the British media, Tzur said.

Indeed, Jewish observers say the British media are among the most anti-Israel in Europe.

The two students created the HonestReporting Web site — writing and circulating occasional reports and rebuttals to the local media — during breaks from their studies.

Their site and e-mails grew in popularity.

By early winter, Diaspora Jewish activists were imploring Israel to beef up its "hasbarah," a Hebrew term for public relations.

In December, the Jerusalem Fund of Aish HaTorah, an Orthodox group focused on outreach to secular Jews, provided close to \$150,000 in seed money to create Media Watch International for a dual purpose: to absorb HonestReporting and continue with its activism and media watchdog work, and to educate the media with position papers, Tzur said.

Position paper topics include "The Palestinian Authority and the Press: A History of Distortion and Intimidation," "Palestinian Children in Danger" and "Palestinian Denial of Religious Freedoms."

In February, minutes after Israelis elected as prime minister Ariel Sharon — often depicted in the media as a "hard-liner," "extremist" or even "war criminal" — Media Watch sent out a position paper to 1,200 American news outlets, explaining who Sharon really "is," Tzur said.

After the injection of Aish cash, individual donors — predominantly American — have picked up the slack, Tzur said.

Still, Media Watch and HonestReporting's staff of less than a dozen workers in Israel and New York operates on a monthly budget in the vicinity of \$25,000, she said.

HonestReporting is set to launch a Spanish-language service based in Buenos Aires — at the behest of Argentine Jewish activists — to combat what they perceive as slanted reporting in the Argentine media, Tzur said.

Media Watch also is considering starting sites in Italy, France, Russia and South Africa.

Today, HonestReporting sends its members biweekly "missives," urging them to respond to bias or inaccuracy and praising outlets they believe provide fair, balanced coverage.

The site currently honors The National Post of Canada and The New Republic for such coverage.

Not surprisingly, HonestReporting has earned its share of enemies.

The site has a long-running feud with The Guardian, the London-based daily that is the newspaper of choice for left-leaning British intellectuals.

In February, HonestReporting members inundated the paper because of its perceived pro-Palestinian bent.

The paper's David Leigh responded with an article headlined "Media Manipulators," in which he hinted that the letter-writers were "right-wing extremists."

Leigh complained that the letters were "a bit scary in their violent tone," citing a snippet that reportedly read "The bloody Guardian... Have you killed a Jew today?"

An American Muslim news service, MSANEWS, reported the "Zionist pressure" applied to the Guardian, and encouraged its own members to join HonestReporting.

"It's good to know what our enemies are up to," said a posting on MSANEWS by a man named Bilal, who then cautioned, "obviously, do not use any Arab-sounding names." □

Mideast expert dies at 69

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Amos Perlmutter, a Mideast expert and professor of political science and sociology at American University, died Tuesday at 69.

Born in Poland, Perlmutter fought in three wars in Israel and served as a member of the Israeli delegation to the United Nations — and as an adviser to the Israeli military.

He died of complications from cancer but worked until his last days, dictating his final column — on the Israeli-Palestinian situation — from his hospital bed. □



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JEWISH WORLD

House condemns Taliban

The U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution Wednesday condemning the Taliban regime in Afghanistan for forcing non-Muslims to wear yellow badges.

Lawmakers objected to the religious discrimination, which reminded many of the tactics used against Jews in Nazi Germany.

Princeton reaches Nazi art deal

Princeton University's art museum reached an agreement allowing it to keep an Italian Renaissance painting taken from the collection of a Jewish resident of Nazi-occupied France during World War II.

The university announced on Wednesday the agreement it reached with the heirs of Frederico Gentili di Giuseppe, whose collection was sold at a forced auction in France after he died of natural causes during the war.

The circa-1500 painting, "St. Bartholomew," has been in the Princeton collection since 1994.

Jews, blacks told to unite

Jews and blacks were discriminated against during the last presidential election and must continue to stand together to fight for justice, Reps. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) and John Lewis (D-Ga.) said at the Third Annual Black/Jewish Congressional Awards ceremony Monday.

The comments came in regard to the "butterfly ballot" that confused many Jewish voters in Palm Beach County, Fla., and allegations that blacks in Florida were hindered from voting.

"Our ancestors all came over in different ships, but we're all in the same boat now," Lewis said.

U.N. honors treaty's author

The United Nations paid tribute Wednesday to a Polish resistance fighter and Holocaust survivor who authored a landmark U.N. treaty, the Genocide Convention, to outlaw mass exterminations.

Raphael Lemkin, born 100 years ago this month in Poland, died in 1959 at the age of 58.

As a Jew in occupied Poland, he became a guerilla fighter and then went to Sweden, where in 1943 he coined the word "genocide" to describe the mass extermination of Jews, Gypsies and Poles.

Lemkin's parents and 47 relatives died in the Holocaust.

British Zionist dies at 86

Sir Sidney Hamburger, one of Britain's leading Zionists, died June 7 at 86. Britain's Orthodox chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, described Hamburger as "one of the best loved and most admired figures within the Anglo-Jewish community."

NEWS ANALYSIS

U.S.-Europe cooperation was the key to cease-fire agreement

By Matthew E. Berger

WASHINGTON (JTA) — Diplomats and activists are praising the coordination between the United States and European leaders in forging the latest cease-fire agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

After six days of intensive negotiations, CIA Director George Tenet left the Middle East on Wednesday with an agreement from both sides to resume security cooperation, end violence in the region and restore the situation on the ground to what it was before Palestinians began their uprising against Israel last September.

While all sides hoped for the best from the "Tenet working plan," few were optimistic.

The Palestinian Authority must take steps to combat terrorism, end anti-Israel incitement and collect mortars and other illegal weapons.

"It's wonderful news that we've signed the document," President Bush said in Brussels.

"But the fundamental question is, will parties take steps to peace, concrete actions that will help build the confidence necessary so that peaceful-loving countries can say, 'the cycle of violence has been finally broken,' and then there is the opportunity to have political discussion."

American Jewish organizations echoed those concerns, citing Arafat's track record of broken peace agreements.

"Arafat should have no doubt that his only option is to abandon violence and honor the cease-fire agreement," Tim Wuliger, president of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, said in a statement.

While Bush's European tour has cast a spotlight on those areas where Europe and the United States disagree — specifically missile defense and climate control — they worked in tandem to bring an end to Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Analysts say European participation was critical to getting Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat to agree to the cease-fire, as the united international front gave Arafat cover for his concessions, analysts said.

"Without it, you're not going to get anywhere," said Edward Walker, former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs and now president of the Middle East Institute.

The United States "opened the doors for regional consultation" after the failed Camp David talks last summer, said Walker, a former ambassador to Israel.

"The people at Camp David realized that one of the failings was, without a broad network of support, you get caught at the last minute and have no one to turn to" for support, he said.

Both American and Israeli officials credit this week's agreement to the fact that Europe and the United States have been on the same diplomatic page in recent weeks. Specifically, they note the efforts of German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who was meeting with Arafat when a Palestinian terrorist blew himself up outside a Tel Aviv disco on June 1, killing 20 Israelis.

The intense condemnation from Fischer — and the realization that Israel was preparing a massive retaliation that could threaten his regime — reportedly helped convince Arafat to call a cease fire.

Each time Arafat speaks to a European leader, the United States discusses the message beforehand.

Fischer is said to have been carrying an "American message" to Arafat that made it clear he would not be able to continue sponsoring terrorism without facing international consequences. "I have no doubt that if there hadn't been U.S. and European coordination, Arafat may not have moved," one Israeli official said.

But some American Jewish leaders remain concerned about European participation in peace discussions, given Europe's traditional pro-Arab bent.

"If they want to play an effective role, they can bring Arafat closer to reality," he said Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. □

ARTS & CULTURE

In 25 years of Jewish publishing, Artscroll has snared the Zeitgeist

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK (JTA) — An untimely death led to the creation of one of the world's most prolific Jewish publishing houses.

In 1976, a friend of Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, then the director of a graphic arts studio in New York, passed away in his sleep a few months before Purim.

Zlotowitz, his colleague Rabbi Nosson Scherman says, "wanted to do something meaningful in his memory — something more meaningful than planting a tree or putting up a plaque."

With Scherman's help, Zlotowitz published an edition of the Book of Esther.

"Both of us had our own separate careers and thought it was a one-shot thing," says Scherman, then the principal of a Brooklyn yeshiva.

They were wrong. The book's first edition sold out its 20,000 copies — which was "unprecedented in Jewish publishing," the affable, bearded Scherman says.

The story of Purim was just the beginning. In its 25 years, Artscroll has published more than 700 books.

Artscroll's headquarters take up almost a complete block in a warehouse district of Brooklyn.

On a recent gray day, small placards advertising phone sex swirled in the air. Inside the building, some of Artscroll's 45 employees were binding sacred Jewish texts.

Artscroll has published books on a wide variety of topics, beginning with Songs of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and Ruth, and moving on to the Torah, Prophets and numerous Passover Haggadahs.

It's currently in the midst of its largest project yet: publication of the entire Talmud. About three-quarters of the 73-volume Schottenstein Talmud in English translation have been published, along with 16 of the Hebrew volumes.

The books' main customers are Orthodox Jews, but Artscroll texts reach a wide audience. Most sales are conducted through Jewish bookstores, Scherman says.

Some 300,000 copies of Artscroll's Stone edition of the Chumash are in circulation; its siddurim, or prayer books, have sold more than 800,000 copies.

"You go on a plane and you see people who don't exactly look Orthodox, and they're reading the Schottenstein Talmud," says Scherman, who is Artscroll's general editor.

What accounts for the imprint's success?

Up-to-date graphics — most of them computer-generated — get some of the credit. Artscroll books are known by the distinctive lettering on their covers.

"Let's not kid ourselves. People do judge a book by its cover," Scherman says. "If the contents of a book aren't good, then the most beautiful presentation won't sell it. But the outward appearance of a book does help sell it."

Timing is another reason. Artscroll's rise coincided with a well-documented thirst for Jewish knowledge among both religious and less observant Jews.

With their concise translations and insightful commentary, the Artscroll editions give a wide audience easier entree into dense, complicated texts. Nowhere is this more evident than in Artscroll's

English version of the Daf Yomi — or daily page — a seven-year method of studying the entire Talmud. Publishing many of its books in English helped Artscroll appeal to a younger generation of yeshiva students.

"For the first time, people had parts of the Bible they could curl up with and feel comfortable with, Scherman says.

Artscroll would not have been able to print its books were it not for the nonprofit Mesorah Heritage Foundation, which raises the money and pays for the labor-intensive scholarship.

With the help of this fund-raising, Artscroll has expanded in recent years to publish books about spirituality and novels.

The company also is publishing textbooks in English about secular subjects for use in both Jewish and secular schools, hoping to counter books that employ gender-neutral language or present gay and lesbian lifestyles in positive ways, Scherman says.

But strictly religious texts remain the firm's bread and butter. They're also where Artscroll has generated the most controversy.

Some Jewish academics say Artscroll's yeshiva-trained scholars are not aware of some linguistic nuances — and, more importantly, reject more modern interpretations that do not square with their fervently Orthodox orientation.

B. Barry Levy, the dean of the religious studies faculty at McGill University in Montreal, says that not only are major non-Orthodox scholars such as Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel excluded from Artscroll texts, but leading modern Orthodox thinkers — such as Nechama Leibowitz, a biblical scholar — are left out as well.

"Despite their claims to be presenting the tradition, what they're presenting is very skewed," says Levy, who received his rabbinical ordination from Yeshiva University, the flagship institution of modern Orthodoxy.

Another leading Orthodox scholar, who asked not to be named, says Artscroll refuses to publish any negative comments about any Jewish figures, preferring to create hagiography rather than history.

Artscroll's Scherman is unapologetic about his publishing house's point of view.

"We present the Torah and Scripture as they were traditionally studied over the past 2,000 years in the academies of Europe, the Middle East and the United States," he says. "We make no bones about it."

The Artscroll texts have "opened the eyes of so many of their Jewish brothers and sisters that there is a remarkable body of learning and scholarship that has emerged from the traditional body of Jewish learning," says David Zwiebel, executive vice president for government and public affairs of Agudath Israel of America, a fervently Orthodox group.

Despite the controversy — which reflects an increasingly vituperative schism between modern Orthodox and fervently Orthodox Judaism — even Levy grants that Artscroll has been successful in its mission. Many of his McGill students, he says, walk into class carrying Artscroll texts.

"When historians look back to the latter part of the 1990s and trace what has become an extraordinary explosion of Jewish learning in the Orthodox community and beyond, a lot of that has been attributable to Artscroll," Zwiebel says.

That success has surprised Scherman.

Asked how he would have reacted 25 years ago to a prediction that Artscroll would be so successful, he replies, "I have a sense of humor. I would have said that that was very funny." □